



MANUAL BREATHING

volume 2: movement

aristotle /
joshua bails /
bi an & matt k /
john charles /
tomas di leo /
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manualbreathing. volume two. movement. dec. 2024.
no nation no person no compromise only art will prevail

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EDITOR NOTES

music, noun

- 1. the manner of moving.*
- 2. excitement, agitation, as the movement of the mind.*
- 3. in music, any single strain or part having the same measure or time.*

Last year, on this exact day, I got into a wreck after sliding on rural winter iced roads. Spinning and smoking is a terrifying feeling that invokes primacy. In other words, movement and motion have been on my mind for quite some time.

Movement is not only in reference to physical change, as noted in the above definition, as it can be just as impactful when it is a mental movement.

Everyone reading this: keep your fucking PMAs going and never let the motion of the world get you down.

All love,

-lan

ON STILL WATERS

by Joshua Bails

The sea began to shake under my sloop and the sky blacked over without warning from the weather radio. Still air turned to a stiff breeze that only continued to pick up speed, churning the waters as they darkened their reflection, before the peaking waves had me clinging to the mast, nauseous over altitudes unnatural to nautical sport. The bow rose over one aquatic mountain after the other, then plummeted into deeper and deeper valleys, walls of water shifting around me with greater force than any I had ever conceived. The sky shattered and the Earth buckled and the two were colliding across a separate plane.

I didn't know how far the squall had carried me away. I was already fifteen miles out before it met me. I thought to radio the coast, but the notion was too late, I was already wrapped around the spar, pressed into my neck with my legs laid out, flat across the deck. And as the waves carried my craft into the sky and dropped me into its gorges, my body rose and fell with it, bouncing off the planks in violent whiplash. I howled out pleading syllables to God and Poseidon and whoever else may have been splashing in their tub, but my illegible prayers were drowned out by the clatter and the din of the savage surf. Until a vacuous silence fell across that rumbling ocean and my call echoed far beyond the endless indigo of sea and sky, like the reverberated bark of a frightened cur. And my pitiful appeal was answered.

Every hair on my being stood on end and my sailboat crested its greatest height. The heavens opened wide with a terrible brightness and a bark that churned my organs to stew. The lightning bolt fired into the middle of the mast as if steered remotely. Time slowed to a near halt, the wave solidified under me, and I watched the electricity serpentine in jagged movements, hard angles, seeking out its target with the care of a ricochet. It pierced into the pole like a bullet, a rain of splinters showered over me, then time resumed its forceful plodding. My sloop sank back down the nadir of the drink, where the sea monsters leered behind their water walls, and gravity's pull finished what the lightning had started. The wood cracked like bones breaking, so sharp that I felt it needle into my spine, then the weight came down.

The top half of the spar swung down against itself and slammed into my right leg four inches above the ankle. The deafening alarms in my head that rose from the impact screamed of fragmented bone and torn artery, as did the involuntary bellow exorcised from my lungs. I saw rose red wavering across my vision of the boiling black sky, felt the tearing blades of my broken skeleton cutting ragged inside of me, and then slipped into the reprieve of nothing.

Hours had passed in my lost moment of blackness. I came to without the vacation reprieve of death, plunged into the icy misery of pain's nausea, still afloat in my battered bucket. The brine was still and impervious in the dark of night, a solid pane of glass only warping to my braindead shutters as reality stabbed its vicious snarl back into my consciousness. Bringing laser puncture stars to prod my brain with countless caravans of dead light, migraines crawling over one another to separate my skull's joints. Though, I could barely feel it over the jigsaw soup in my leg's newest joint.

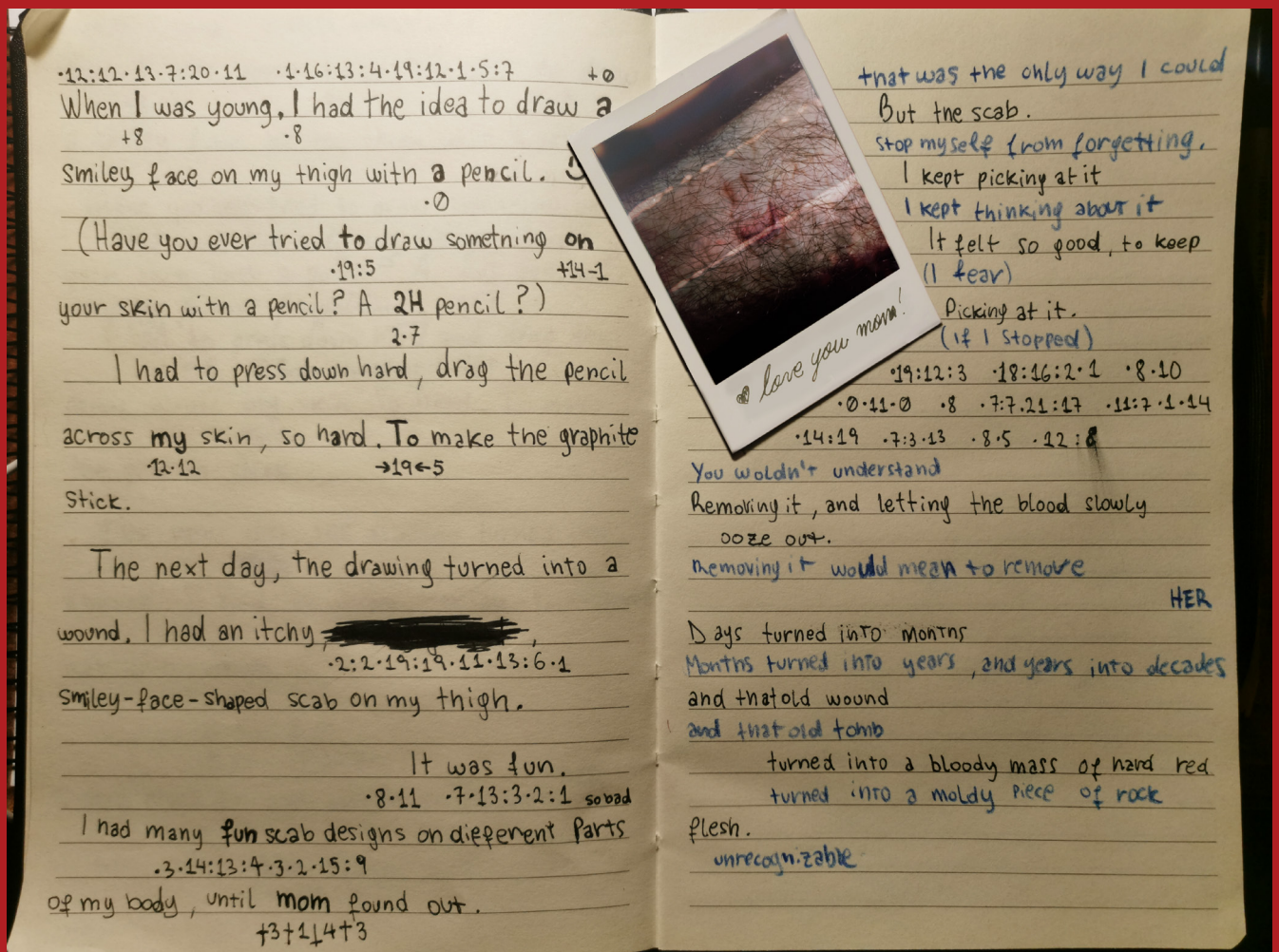
This pain was what surfaced my mind into the waking world again. The million little teeth gnawing away beneath my shin, tearing even when still, but stillness was illusion. My heart was beating apocalypse marches after the war was already lost and every palpitation was an aftershock of the cannons and the mortars and the artillery. I could barely even open my eyes to look, I didn't want to see, but there wasn't a choice. I was miles out from shore, more than I cared to figure, and I was broken. There was minor consolation, however. Somehow in the calamity, the broken mast had cleared off my leg and laid flat beside it, hanging only slightly by the halyard tangled against its fracture's splinters. Whether it was the rise and fall of the waves, or the impact itself that wrestled the beam off me is unclear and just as incon-

-sequential, as I was in too grave a situation to see the small good that was afforded to me. There was only fire in my mind.

I laid there quietly weeping to myself for many hours before enough of my breath came to compose me. Adrenalin, shock, whatever it was, I was going numb. I could see beyond psychedelic, bloody flashes against the moonless sky. I could think of more than illiterate agony. But still, I was exhausted. Sweat poured down my face in gallons and all I could taste was the dust on my tongue. I had clean drinking water below deck, maybe even a bottle at the helm if it hadn't been thrown into the waves. None close enough to reach for and the thought of crawling, of dragging my leg even an inch, sent anxious missiles throughout my all. And this was every moment that passed from thereon. A notion of panic, of need, followed by the terror of pain and misery and death. I dreamed of lifting myself on the spar's standing remains and hobbling below deck to radio the coast guard. Or even just slowly dragging myself down to search for the emergency flares. But I could never bring myself to move. Even as the pangs gave way to total numbness, I could never rise up over the memory of my torment.

So, here I lay. Forever fearful that the suffering will return, no matter the grief that grips me through this ceaseless stagnation. Patiently awaiting the next tempest.

TOMAS DILEO MOVE ON



•12:12:13:7:20:11 •4:16:13:4:19:12:1:5:7 +0
When I was young, I had the idea to draw a
+8 -8

Smiley face on my thigh with a pencil. 0

(Have you ever tried to draw something on
•19:5 +14-1
your skin with a pencil? A 2H pencil?)
2:7

I had to press down hard, drag the pencil
across my skin, so hard. To make the graphite
12:12 →19←5
stick.

The next day, the drawing turned into a
wound. I had an itchy, ~~scab~~,
•2:2:19:19:11:13:6:1
smiley-face-shaped scab on my thigh.

It was fun.
•8:11 •7:13:3:2:1 so bad
I had many fun scab designs on different parts
•3:14:13:4:3:2:15:9
of my body, until mom found out.
+3+1+4+3

that was the only way I could
But the scab.

stop myself from forgetting.
I kept picking at it
I kept thinking about it
It felt so good, to keep
(I fear)

Picking at it.
(if I stopped)

•19:12:3 •18:46:2:1 •8:10
•0:11:0 •8 •7:7:21:17 •11:7:1:14
•14:19 •7:3:13 •8:5 •12:8

You wouldn't understand

Removing it, and letting the blood slowly
ooze out.

removing it would mean to remove

HER

Days turned into months

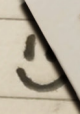
Months turned into years, and years into decades
and that old wound
and that old tomb

turned into a bloody mass of hard red
turned into a moldy piece of rock
flesh.

unrecognizable

$\cdot 12:12 \cdot 13:7:20 \cdot 11 \quad \cdot 1:16:13:4:19:12 \cdot 1:5:7 \quad +0$

When I was young, I had the idea to draw a
 $+8 \quad \cdot 8$

Smiley face on my thigh with a pencil. 
 $\cdot 0$

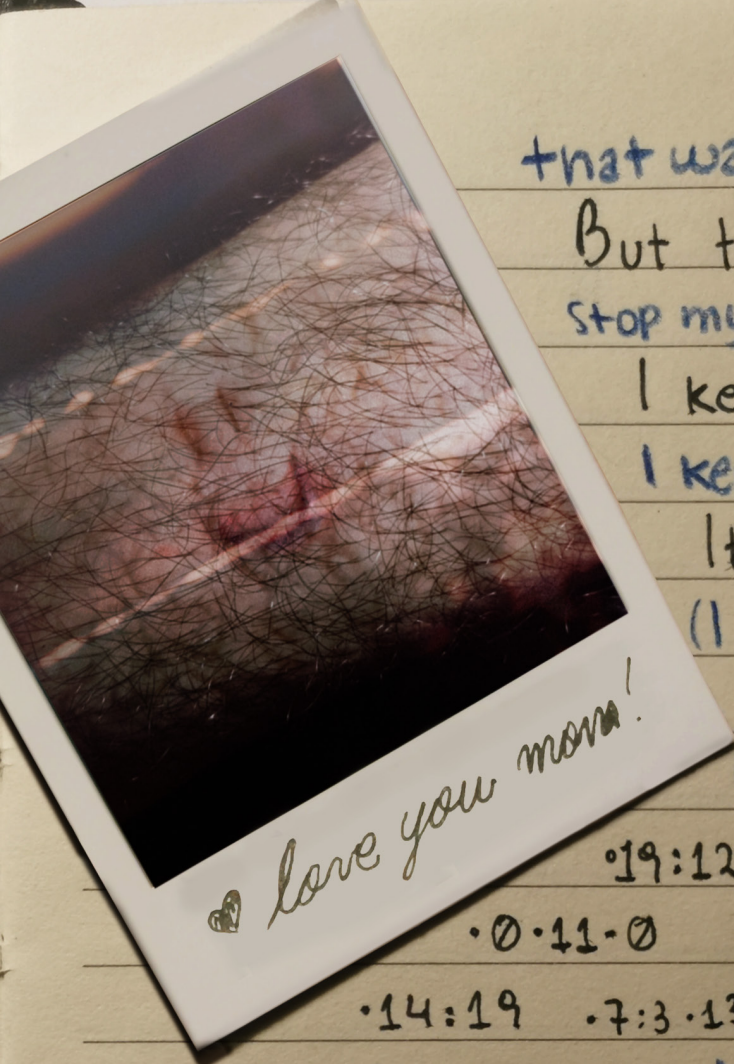
(Have you ever tried to draw something on
 $\cdot 19:5 \quad +14-1$
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 $2:7$

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across my skin, so hard. To make the graphite
 $\cdot 12:12 \quad \rightarrow 19 \leftarrow 5$
stick.

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 $\cdot 2:2:19:19:11:13:6:1$
smiley-face-shaped scab on my thigh.

It was fun.
 $\cdot 8:11 \quad \cdot 7:13:3:2:1$ so bad

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 $\cdot 3:14:13:4:3:2:15:9$
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 $+3+1+4+3$



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·19:12:3 ·18:16:2·1 ·8·10

·0·11·0 ·8 ·7:7.21:17 ·11:7·1·14

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unrecognizable

LITTLE FREE LIBRARY

by Stephen Meyer

Dear Mister Curious,

I see you. As a matter of fact, I see you every day. Didn't you ever think about why I'd put the thing up in the first place? It wasn't because of a love of books. I hate books. They stole my eyes. Remember that old adage about how you'll go blind reading all the damn time? Maybe a so-called old hag told you that. Picture this hag: an old woman in a leopard's fur coat and a biker's hat. She's living all by herself in a townhouse built for a family on a major city street. Maybe that family died tragically. Maybe that family abandoned her because they viewed her as a lost cause, or because they were told to "divorce their family from their minds" and applied that same advice to their hearts, too.

Maybe she was a sadistic teacher of yours. Maybe she's prone to enacting the same cruelty that the entire world has shown her on to others. Maybe she has a heart of gold and a winsome soul behind those beady black eyes you seem so terrified to look into. You didn't care to find out. You didn't listen to her, in fact, because you weren't able to look into those eyes, which communicated the seriousness of those familiar words you'd been ignoring all your life. She was only trying to help you, which is why she phrased the words like a joke or a verse from a song, so they'd be imprinted in your memory forever. "You'll go blind, a-dah, you'll never see again, a-doh..."

If you've pictured the woman, seen her deep-set wrinkles that distract you from the features of her face which are the Platonic ideal of the golden ratio, witnessed in your imagination her crane-like broken body that she adorns with a hodge-podge of opulent accessories, you have seen me, for I am her.

The old adage about going blind is true. Of course, reading was not all to blame - I didn't have anyone to drive me to the one ophthalmologist in Somerville that would accept my insurance, and so I was never able to update my prescription in time, and so I needlessly strained my eyes until they succumbed to all those years of unintentional masochism. Self harm in the guise of edification. I was whipping my own back with a barbed rope when I tried to read my first edition copy of one of those hideous self-indulgent modernist novels that the author never manages to finish, oh, Musil was his name, the dolt. I was drinking bleach when I tried to read that well-researched historic text that supposedly "exhausted" every iota of an average day in Ancient Rome. I was slashing my wrists when I read that collection of short stories by that magnificent novelist who was only good at writing plots, not poetry. I was stubbing cigarettes on my thigh when I was enjoying a vampire tale, I was throwing myself off a cliff following those shaggy dog detective stories, and I was drowning in corporate espionage, Tudor dramas, half-baked philosophical treatises written with confidence, hard-boiled yarns about twenty-something orphans, misanthropic French picaresque epics....I was pushing myself towards an impossible vision of divinity, and it distracted me from my domesticities, and I ran myself up a wall, and I made myself out to be a picture of serenity that should not be disturbed, so therefore, everyone left me alone, and now I miss them dearly, those loved ones, those that kept me tethered and present and focused, I with nothing to do and no strength to bear the world around me.

I can still see some things, with the help of my glasses. They're as thick as stones, and they further my appearance as someone who is losing in the race against time. Me at only 68 years old. The images I see are fractured. They refuse to settle, they are wavering somewhere at the tip of my perfectly sized, wart-spotted nose. If you wink several times, once with each eye, and speed that process up, then close them, then rub your eyes until you become tired, then open them, then try to focus on these words I've written, then you'll have an idea of how I see the world. Everything floats, drips, melts, and disappears into phosphenes, and they materialize for an instant, until those crooked rainbow serpents return and cast everything into doubt. It would be correct to suggest that I should wear sunglasses, that it

would be a merciful gift, but with what money? And to say nothing of the fact that I don't want to accept defeat against my own body.

I am desperately lonely now. The walls do talk now. They talk in haggard conspiratorial whispers, and they remind me of what they once saw. I was Ms. Socialite, the talk and the envy of Somerville. I threw lavish parties the likes of which you, Mr. Curious, could not even begin to imagine, debauchorous affairs that people would brag about attending after, and that they would even advertise to passersby as they were being loaded into the ambulance: "Check it out, it's an open invitation, the alcohol poisoning was well worth it, for I have seen Paradise". Friends and neighbors dropped by every morning just to chat, and they'd find me on the front porch, reading some book, but when they arrived, I would close it with an accidental harrumph and entertain them for hours with coffee and cigarettes and my stories, which were about all the things I had seen and done and all the plans I had for my golden years.

The harrumphs added up, and word spread, and people stopped doing that, imagining that I would be happy with all my books, which I apparently talked about ad nauseam when I reached difficult to recount spots in my stories, as a means of explaining myself succinctly in terms that were easier to recount.

What happened to my plans? The world took them from me. I married the wrong man, that is true, but he was good and kind when he was alive, yet his ghost is absent, for he died in a hospital, not here where he should have, and thus I have no protection against the ghosts in the house, the ones of my own creation, the ones that speak to me at night and cannot be proven to exist but must, for I feel them, I feel their presence, and I am at war with them, and soon they will win.

My house was once painted mulberry red and royal purple. Now it's been covered in black, in preparation for the sale, to more plainly demonstrate its Gothic appeal to a potential buyer. Me, I'm being shipped away to that farm upstate you've heard about, and it's all your fault, Mr. Curious.

I have tried to reach you before, for it seemed as though you would be sympathetic to my cause. You dress as I used to, still do, in fact, in the clothes my sisters and brothers have sold to consignment. You must have felt as I did, in some small way, but I never wanted you to become me, that wasn't the point.

I tried many schemes. I saw you from my lookout post. I may have been possessed by the ghosts that haunt my house, unwilling and unable to stop them from wearing me as a mask, lost in ruminations about them, and that might have scared you off. My wave, meant as a salute, to a fellow soldier in a war you yourself had been unwittingly drafted into, the war against living ghosts, was interpreted as a dark omen, and you sauntered away, but you looked back upon the ruin of my house though you had often been chided not to. You rejected that Bible parable about the fallen city and took its lesson as a dare. Were you looking at me, or the surveyors of my property? Those dreadful men in fleece vests and watches on their wrists, those watches men in fleece vests speak to, knowing their arcane chattering locust words would be unintelligible to the likes of me, an endless spree of numbers and code words that were and are spoken so coldly as to be unrecognizable as something borne of a soul? Oh, how I hate them, and you did too, you spat on the sidewalk leading to them, perhaps leaving behind a wad of gum to distract them from the imminent sale, which I appreciated, but your hatred only went surface-level, I feared, and so I had to signal to you that they were trying to cheat me out of a home some other way.

In a titanic effort, I wheeled my chair to my study, where my library is, was, and I fetched some paper and a marker. I created several drafts of my message: one of which read:

HELLO, PEDESTRIANS

My name is Edith Titherington. I have lived on Highland Avenue for four decades. I am going blind, but I still have my wits about me. All my friends have moved out or died, and my children don't call me anymore.

I am in danger of eviction. My landlord has sold my building to his son, that rotten bastard, who has different ideas for the property. He wants to sell it and rent it out to engineers, as he has a decidedly different vision for our neighbor-

-hood. I have never bothered to purchase the property, feeling comfortable in my situation.

I need help. I need someone to put me into contact with a lawyer, and as I can hardly read even large print mysteries specifically written for other women in my predicament anymore, I certainly cannot sift through dozens of documents that are written in legalese. It's gibberish to me and I don't have the energy for it.

I will die if I move. I mean that quite literally. I'm only 68, I have grown used to this community. God, won't someone help me? My door is kept unlocked as a rule. You can always come inside and talk to me, or read to me. That helps. Thanks.

I tacked it up to my bay window for a time with a roll of masking tape lying on the ground, abandoned, in my library. It stood for two months, until I was robbed for the first time. I addressed it to pedestrians in the plural because I did not want to startle you, you who always had his head on a swivel, you who seemed in awe of the work of God and of Mankind all around you to the point of madness, by singling you out. I knew you would see it, regardless. You always looked at me waving to you in my window, and you quickened your gait when you saw me, and after a few months, I stopped waving, and just stared back. I understood why this frightened you, but God, you should have known that I was a person and not a ghost, and certainly not someone to be ignored.

I tried to learn your routine. I came to realize it didn't adhere to any regular time, but you had a pattern, or at least, one constant: you walked by my house every day. You headed in the direction of Davis Square - sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night, sometimes in the middle of the day.

You wore different outfits depending on what time it was. I liked that. In the early morning, you wore the same thing you had worn the night before. In the middle of the day, you wore a black suit with all manners of different ties. At night, you dressed much like me: your own garish opulent fur coat, skin-tight jeans, and a beret. You are a young man, and this didn't quite add up, then I stumbled upon a theory: you were calling out to me, in your own special way. You were becoming an ally, you maybe even told your friends about me, and they would eventually come around to my apartment on Highland Avenue and help me.

The stupidest thing I put in the letter was the line about my door always being unlocked. I trusted my neighbors to not take advantage of this knowledge. Somerville is a safe place, I thought, filled with enlightened people, families, and kindness. I understand that word could have spread to other, less safe, less enlightened neighborhoods, full of wicked unimaginative crooks.

I was still able to sleep back then. I would, after a dozen hours at my post, succumb to fatigue, and I would drift into slumber on my wing chair. One night, I awoke to a sound. I had the momentary fancy that the ghosts had materialized into poltergeists. Maybe I wasn't too far off. Shadows moved all around me, muttering, and I was too weak to move or even scream out in terror, before everything became shadow anyways - a bag tied over my head - and I heard the wicked crooks take some of the treasures that remained in my house: jewelry and silverware and pipes to be sold on the black market.

I took the sign down, and replaced it with a more simple one: HELP. That didn't work either, and eventually, you took to walking on the other side of the street. My direct plea for a savior seemed to only have disgusted and embarrassed you. The burglaries continued, and once every last scrap of plumbing and artwork had been taken from my home, I began to forgo sleep in favor of constant vigilance. I managed to dissuade one burglar from touching my essentially valueless library by my words. I cursed him out, called him an incestual murderous necrophiliac rapist, and he abandoned the books, convinced I had stumbled upon the truth. He did, however, take a spray-can to my walls and drew symbols, awful abstract reconstructions of Pagan imagery. These images still stand. I have no way to paint over them. The new landlord, that odious prick, will be quite shocked to discover them.

The final time someone broke into my home was recent. I will write the story in the manner of one of those horror novels you're so fond of, in the hopes of capturing your attention. One dark and stormy night, in February, no less, a hopeless broke addict stumbled inside a poor

old woman's home on a busy main street. He was there to indulge in his addiction with some shelter over his head. He had heard the poor old woman kept her door unlocked as a rule.

Upon entering, the hopeless broke addict was shocked to discover that someone was already in the living room. It was the poor old woman who lived there. She was sitting on a rickety wicker arm-chair and rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Her eyes were beady and black, and she stared at the street, and she muttered to herself things like: "Oh Arthur, won't you come home, won't you come back" and "these rotting stupid stinking bastards littering my street are going to Hell" and, most chillingly, "You'll go blind, a-dah, you'll never see again, a-doh..."

The hopeless broke addict felt as though this poor old woman didn't mind his presence, as she wasn't addressing him or even breaking her gaze from the street, and so he moved to the empty, furniture-less kitchen, sat on the ground, and began the process. He procured the intravenous needle, the hosiery, and was about to continue when he felt inside him, somewhere amidst the space between his two legs, a deep-set tingling sensation, which was followed by a voice, somewhere deep inside him: "Leave now, run away, or you'll never see again."

The hopeless broke addict ignored this voice and succumbed to his vice. He experienced all those wonderful sensations, which were really at this point just a return to being able to think straight, though for about a half a second as the needle flooded his veins, he felt the pang of that dragon he was chasing. He collapsed on the kitchen floor some time later.

The next morning, sunlight invading the kitchen through the curtain-less window, the hopeless broke addict woke up with the imagery of a half-remembered REM cycle nightmare in his mind's eye, one about Jesus laughing on the cross. The voice returned, and said: "Too late...", and all went black, as if a sitcom character had turned the lights off on the main set in the last scene of the series finale.

He, the hopeless broke addict, ran away from the house, with his hands over his face, screaming: "I CAN'T SEE NUTH'N! I CAN'T SEE NUTH'N!"

The poor old woman took a break from her usual mutterings and let out a coyote's howl. It would be the last time she would ever laugh in her life.

Word must have spread, and no street urchin or amoral aristocrat ever dared to set foot in my house again. The only people who visited me, for a time, were the people the son of a bitch landlord's son had hired to 'renovate'. The landlord's uncle was, in fact, my dearly departed Arthur's brother, and most of the people he hired were cousins who bore slight resemblances to my dead dead dead husband, and I suppose that's how I was even able to differentiate them from the hooligans, the riotous wretched downtrodden criminals, and the cruel heckling wandering wealthy scum. While inside, the workers would give me the barest recognitions: "*Oh, Ms. Titherington, how's about that weather?*", things of that nature.

They didn't ask me where my things were, they didn't seem to think anything was wrong with the symbology on the walls: that is, all but one of them.

His name, he told me, was Robert. Robert was a strapping chap, with the body of a street fighter and the face of a talk show host. I never asked his age, but he was old enough to understand that I was really, truly lonely, and young enough to care.

I came to realize he was the apprentice. He carried the things the other workers didn't want to; the spool of measuring tape and the buckets of nails. He recorded numbers on a clipboard and did a lot of nodding and "uh-huhs".

These supposed renovators took their time. Their lunch breaks were interminably long, and they even dared to smoke vapor from cold sleek rectangles in the kitchen. I was never given fair warning of when they were coming, sometimes it was days, other times seemingly decades, that constituted the gaps between. I lost track of where I was, when it was, even, in those gaps, but at least there was you strolling down the street, to mark another day in the calendar.

Let me clue you in on aging, and the concurrent loss of memory: I am not yet in my heart of

hearts, in my mind's mind, unsure of people's identities. I may use the wrong names, I may go through an entire mental Rolodex of related ones, but that is only because I don't care as much about labels and appearances. Everyone is essentially the same, and that goes double for family. Even in the case of the anonymous surveyors that bore particular resemblances to Arthur, I knew the score, but on that fateful day, when Robert Shelby sat down on the windowsill and blocked my view of the street, I must admit, doubt crept in.

It was some ineffable manner of shared body language. The way he used his hands to emphasize certain clauses in his speech, or even to announce his presence. Robert and Arthur chomped into an apple the same way, they refused to hold their pinky finger out when they sipped, and their eyes....to say nothing of their eyes. Their voice and their faces were of course close to clones.

I told him, rather bluntly: "You're blocking my view." I didn't think it was necessary to explain why that was important to me. I was going blind, I wanted to *know* a place for the last time, and every second I had to look at something else was a distraction from that ambitious undertaking.

He didn't dignify my outburst with a response. He instead asked me a rude question: "What are you reading?", and pointed to the book draped open on my knee, which was one from my collection of hundreds that now lay in great swathe-like piles all over my living room floor. It's a rude question to ask of anyone, let alone someone who was going blind, and only had the book with me to remind me of my former love. So I threw it at him, not really caring if it hit him in the head, which it did.

Robert *laughed*, then picked it up and looked at its cover. "Hmm." he said. "*Auto-da-fe*. Elias Canneti. Never heard of it."

"Well, I never got around to reading it. I don't even know what it's about," I blurted out, assuming a savage, unearned tone, but thank the Lord, Robert did not take my attack seriously, and he stayed.

He read to me the entire novel. *Auto-da-fe* is about an impossibly wealthy intellectual who is driven insane by his love for books. Not literature, just books, and he treats them as objects to be hoarded. I suppose that had its resonance with me, but I despised its central protagonist, and celebrated the multitude of failures and horrors that he bore through as if he were the opposing team at some sports event. Robert, seeming to enjoy the experience, pledged to continue reading to me as long as it was amenable to his schedule. And so he did, as he was similar to Arthur in that he actually kept his word. He read to me countless novels and plays and poems, history books and encyclopedias and philosophical tracts. It was a constant comfort to me, his voice was like grained honey, and he knew exactly which intonations to emphasize, and he knew when to clear his throat. In all the refuse and isolation of my golden years turned bronze, those visits returned me to a woman of functional mind and sound spirit.

I wonder what you, Mr. Curious, felt when you saw me behind the window with another man. Did it comfort you? It must have. You returned to walking to Davis Square by my side of the street. I wonder if you still thought I was a ghost then. I wonder if I'm a ghost too. I wonder if I've died years ago, and that Robert had brought me back to life by simply acknowledging my presence. That's a weak thought, the product of an impoverished dying mind, but it's true.

Eventually, I became comfortable enough with Robert to tell him about my anxiety about being moved to the farm. He confirmed, with reluctance, my worst fear: it was true, it was happening, Arthur's rat bastard nephew was indeed going to sell the place, he just needed me out. His plan was simple: get me to forget to sign the rent checks. I needed to stay vigilant.

Robert had more bad news, which was that the filthy incorrigible nephew was going to force him to move to a different town, supposedly to help with a different property he owned, but really, I suspect, to get him to stop reading to me, and to therefore lose my mind. I would lose my actual tether to reality.

I needed someone else to read to me, talk to me, so that wouldn't happen. I also needed someone to help with my legal troubles. My children have been dispersed all over America. I had no idea how to reach them, and they wouldn't have been willing to help either way, the goddamned brats. It was

hopeless. Then, I had a thought: you, my thrifty wandering friend.

I had a good idea. Robert would stand outside one day, wait for you, and invite you inside the building. Then we would have a chat, and I would gather the kindness I had forgotten, and I would explain that I need someone to talk to me from time to time, and help me both keep my home and keep the ghosts at bay. Robert, on his last day in Somerville, agreed to play Pied Piper.

You may recall the afternoon in question. Let me paint the picture for you: it was Fool's Spring, the wind was howling, scaring the buds on the branches of the trees back into hiding. You were wearing your ironed black suit with your starched white buttoned shirt and your black and gold paisley tie. I watched everything go down. Robert stood on the sidewalk right where you'd be soon passing by, and around the time the sun was at its highest, you arrived. You have a peculiar gait, you must know that, and your long spidery legs almost carried you right past my Robert.

He got you to stop by way of flattery. He complimented your suit. You turned as if on a swivel and, walking backwards, said a few words to express your gratitude. He beckoned you forward. He explained my predicament, and you looked at me, longer than normal, and I saw you tug at your collar, then walk away, expressing some fictive deep sorrow.

I cursed you then. "Why, Robert, could such a strapping young man, of theoretically sound heart and soul, deny a poor lonesome spinster with a heart of gold to equal his, some company?" I said that in a different way, I'm of course being literary. "How come that rotten bastard is too lazy to read a book to a kind old bitch like me?" is closer to what I actually said.

Robert and I plotted. We wouldn't accept defeat that easily. There had to be some other way to reach you. The messages taped to my window didn't help, nor did outright face-to-face communication with my ally. We had to get you to come inside the house somehow, so I could talk to you outright. I am very persuasive in person, even more so than in writing, and I would be able to get you to do the right thing by me.

We assembled a theory - you were a man of culture. Clearly, you enjoyed fashion, what with your vintage clothing - fur coats, leather jackets, designer suits, all manners of jewelry and accessories...that, to me, indicated artistic tendencies. Was music your vice? We tried. Robert brought a stereo system and played selections from a wide variety of genres - classical, jazz, and even dreadful rock 'n' roll from the open bay window. You turned your head on one of your strolls to Davis Square, but you still denied me when I stared back at you. I figured movies might be another option. My television set had been stolen from me in the burglary era, but Robert was kind enough to bring a projector and hung up a sheet by the bay window. I had you pegged even then as a fan of horror, and I screened some classics from my youth - Vincent Price, Gothic monsters, Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*....it didn't work, though I saw you smirk from my bay window - that stupid, ignorant, *blind* smirk.

We had to settle on the last option - the books that had miraculously been spared from the filthy grubby hands of all the robbers that had invaded my home. We set up a trap in the guise of a contribution to the community. On Robert's last day at work in Somerville, he built a wooden box atop a marble pillar. He fashioned it into the guise of my own beloved house, with its mulberry red and purple walls, its hedged roof, its black and white chimney indicating former Loyalist alliances. The box was given a door, clear and made of glass, and I bid Robert to shelve in their some of my favorite books, and a couple for you as well, the imagined persona of a good-natured soul scared out of his wits by an old lady staring at him through her bay window. They were, as follows:

- *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* - Flannery O'Connor
- *The Horror of...* - Ambrose Bierce
- *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* - Carson McCullers
- *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* - Shirley Jackson
- *The Woman in Black* - Susan Hill

Much of these had been gifts from Arthur, or other deceased or dearly missed friends. I parted with them all the same. I was trying to call out to you with their titles more than their content, though I

reasoned the McCullers might teach you a scrap of goddamned empathy... Robert called the structure something funny. "A little free library." He was being ridiculous, and a dolt. All libraries are free. That's an essential part of their service. Anyone can go to the library and get a book if they can prove they live in the area. They're always free. Still, he insisted that's what I had made him build: a little free library. They were all the rage in Somerville and the rest of the affluent neighborhoods in the city. If anything, I was doing something kind.

Robert left, and me, three-quarters blind and too frail to even flip the pages, could not read. The ghosts returned, this time in the day. Sunlight invaded the bay window one day at high noon. It cast me, the sunlight, as a decaying pomegranate left out to rot on the street. My wrinkles felt permanent, like they were being carved out in real time and drying out like cracked pottery, the liver-spots on my hands and wrists and forearms transformed into spiders spinning webs into my innards, my scraggly white hair was the sprouts of a potted plant dumped onto my head, with all the concurrent dirt flooding my ear-holes, and my dying eyes were saturated by that Satan-spawned sun.

In the corner of the former library, the image of Arthur appeared. He looked as he did when he was young - tall, tanned, muscular, a friendly mop of jet-black choppy hair falling down his face just so. He was in a funeral suit, the same one he might have worn to attend my father's memorial, and I remembered that day, and what I had told him in the closet - "*God, what a relief*" and: "*I wish it was a funeral every day, you look so dashing...*" as I caressed his inner thigh...

I entertained the momentary fancy that the ghosts that haunted my house had invited his spirit into my home. I smiled, for the last time in my life, I'd wager, and I said to him: "Hello..."

"Edith, my love," he replied. "I am here to take you somewhere, to be with me."

"I don't want to leave. I fear I am too weak to move from this spot. It would kill me."

The spirit shook his head. "You shouldn't be afraid of that. Death is just the next journey of life, it is the natural sequel. Think of it like an epilogue that turns into a novel in and of itself, my dear, one that never ends and has a piece of wisdom or some dramatic event on each page."

He bent down to meet me at eye level in my wing chair by the window then, this spirit. He took my hand, and he rubbed the liver spots on the back of my palm, and they seemed to disappear, and I felt myself escape my own body, this stupid fucking mortal coil, and I floated away, beyond the bay window.

We drifted, slowly at first, then rapidly, down Highland Avenue. It took hours, it took minutes, it took a day, it took a moment - the light changed from harsh and invasive white to a serene ochre, then it turned into the navy blue. We saw all the houses on the street and the businesses fade, their glittering windows advertising artisanal peanuts or law services or the neighborhood pub that had once been my stomping grounds smashed and turned into glass, then they became imposing slabs of wood, and we drifted into Davis Square. I didn't recognize any of the other people who passed my window, but they appeared similar to the wretched coarse aristocrats that were plotting to remove me - all with their hyuking hyena faces glued to their watches on their wrists chattering their locust screeds, dressed in fleece vests over checkered button downs with mismatched periwinkle blue and red patterns - God, I hated them, reviled them, wanted to spit on them, but I found that the desire was impossible to consummate, as I had no body to speak of.

The spirit and I arrived at a courtyard in the middle of Davis Square, where the street people congregate. They seemed to acknowledge my bodiless presence, they shuddered when I passed through them, and dispersed. That left me in my limbo state, the spirit, and you.

You were dressed in that leopard fur coat that looks so much like mine. Your handsome young face was slathered with a comical amount of glitter and makeup. You were with a friend, and you were chatting over a beer you ought not to be drinking in public. You were flaunting your freedom and your youth and your privilege, but I could sympathize with that, for I was young and stupid once, too. In your other hand, you held one of the books I had left out for you - I believe it was the Ambrose Bierce collection.

"She's the scariest person I've ever seen in my life," you said, and you looked right at the spot I

was floating in, as if you could actually see me, for once, but the goddamn smirk was plastered on your face, so you did not appear frightened, and you said that as if you were George Carlin or Redd Foxx.

“What’s she look like?” asked your companion, who was dressed in the uniform of an Air Force veteran.

You shook your head. “I can’t even begin, man,” you replied. “Like my grandma went to Hell and came back to murder me. I’ll give you an impression.” And you contorted your wrist all dainty-like, and you fashioned your face into an expression of serene torture, your eyes lost their whiteness, and you cackled after your little performance was over.

“You know,” said your companion, “that’d be an excellent character for you. In a drag show, or something. Mrs. Titherington on Highland Avenue, the wealthy lonely grandmother gone insane.”

“I’m not gay enough to do drag.”

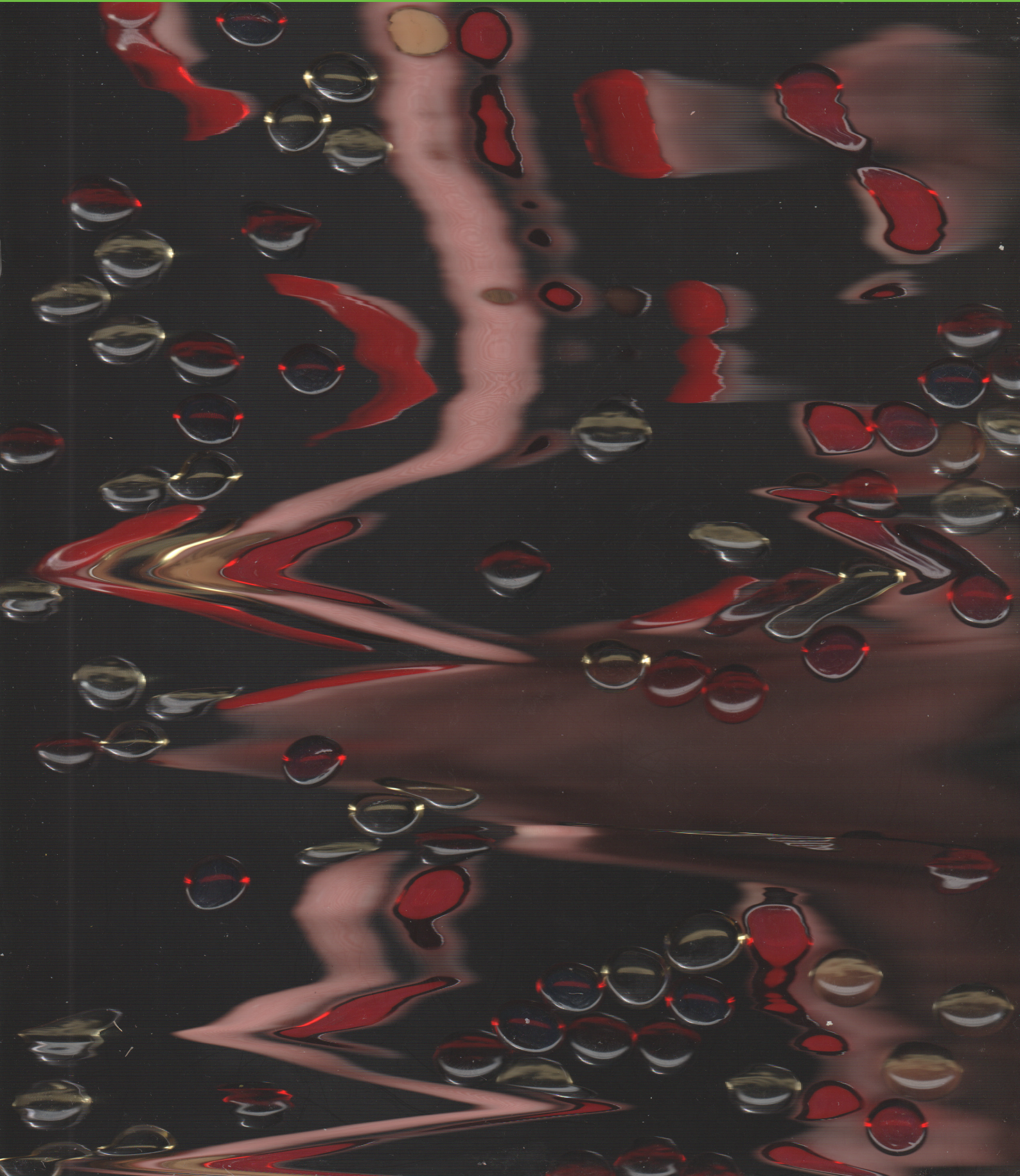
I would have laughed, but I had no throat to do it. The spirit that had brought me to the courtyard announced our presence with a single solitary screech for me. It didn’t look like Arthur anymore. It looked like Satan.

And I knew I had been tricked. I felt in that moment wrenched back into corporeality, like those nightmares one has where they’re falling or sliding on a patch of ice. I came to being again, on that courtyard, toiling on the ground, coughing blood out of my guts.

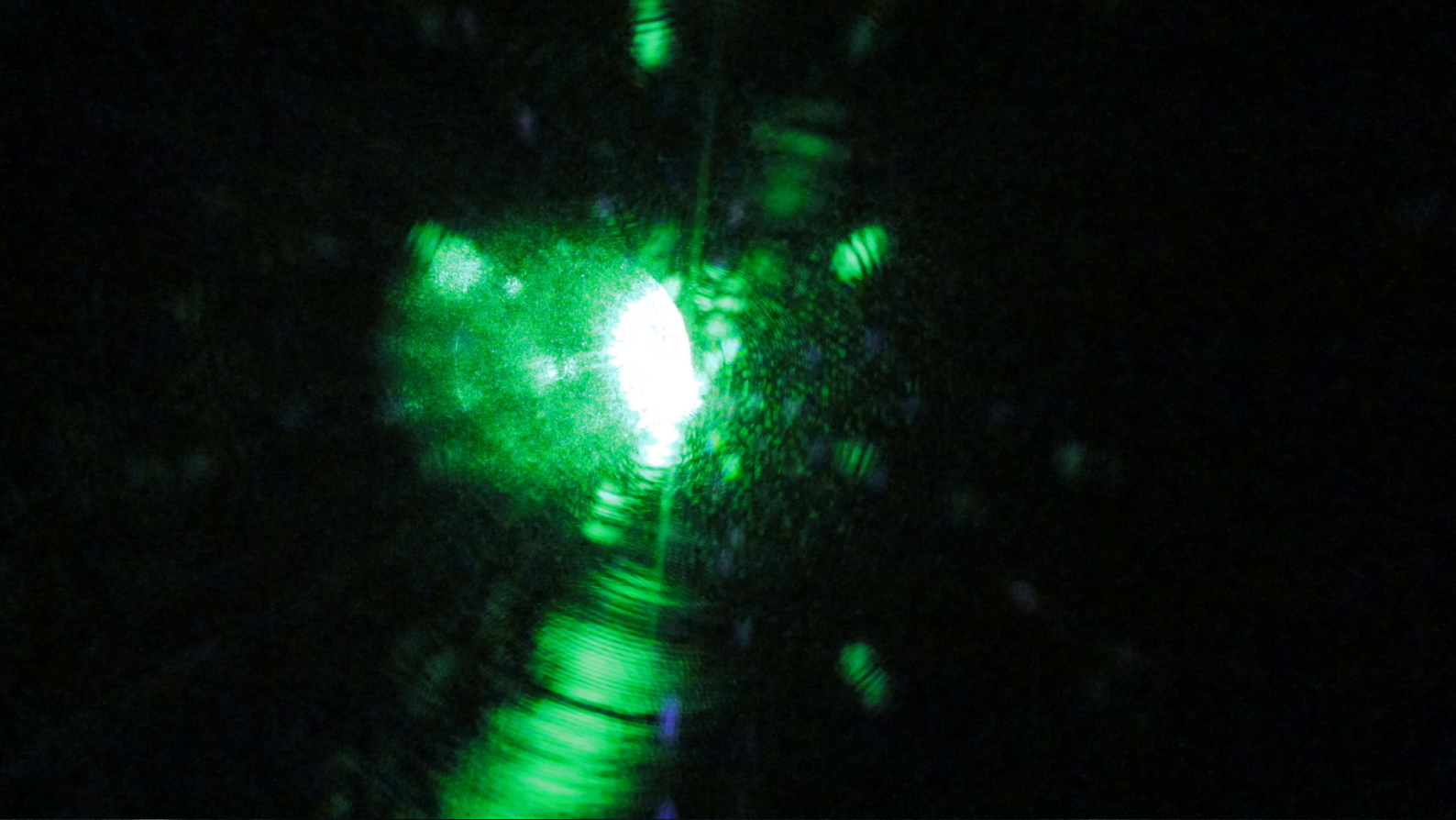
You did not help. You exclaimed: “Oh, God, is that *her*?”, and you ran away. No one came for me, either. I was outside in the midnight air for hours, frigid and covered with my own blood, barely able to see, until I eventually saw a tunnel of white, and I climbed into it, and I was spat out into my wing-chair in the living room, I was, really, and I sat there for years, decades, days, hours, millenia, until the walls were painted over, those arcane symbological graffiti wiped clean by blackness, ugly modern furniture and economically viable plumbing was brought in, and you or someone who looked just like you moved in, some dithering locust foolish bastard hopeless broke addict murderer necrophiliac rapist, and I joined the side of the other ghosts, those that alternately shouted or whispered things like “Get Out” or “You’ll go blind, a-dah, a-doh,” and I added my own line to their chorus:

“Oh, won’t someone read to me...”

ian rickett
telephone america
(photography 2016-24)











ISAAC RYALS **heat death**

Once the steady rhythm of my heart
stutter-stops,
once my lungs take their last few gasps
around my last few breaths,
once my brain has its last
moment of panic-
once that last-ditch
electrical storm is done-
even then,
that body is a universe
and the universe is still moving.

Once my proteins have disintegrated,
once my cells have spilled their guts,
even then, the empty cavern of my body
will echo with the vibrations
of every atom that ever raced
along my pulse
or moved my lungs
or sparked my brain
in a thousand dancing thoughts.

And even then,
into the seconds and decades and eons after,
every scrap that was once me
might still recall
the taste of air
through my mouth,
the rush of ground
beneath my feet.

And only once the light has poured
into every corner of the universe
and back,
once every star has spun apart,
once every planet has groaned
to a frozen halt,
all those atoms that were once me
will nestle in with all the rest
until we collide
and jostle
and settle
and decay
down
to lead.

CASTLE METTE

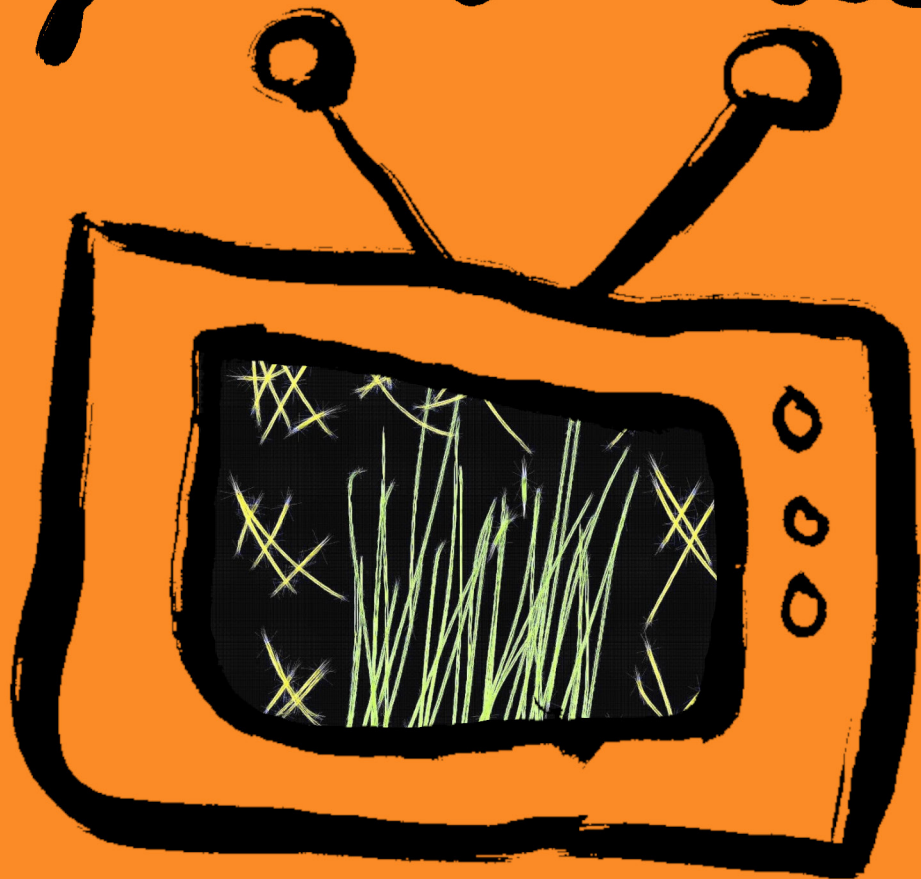
persistent divergence



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